

Keith's late goal gives Blues fourth title in 5 years

Wycombe Wanderers 1, Dagenham 0
REPORT BY STUART EARP

FOR 85 long minutes on Saturday, it seemed Wycombe Wanderers had missed the chance of retaining the Rothmans Isthmian League 'championship in their final match of the season against Dagenham. Chances had been created and missed, the game looked destined for a 0-0 final scoreline ... then Loakes Park erupted.

The goal that 4,000 fans had been waiting for, the goal that meant the league title and a £1,000 prize, the goal that made a season's toil all worthwhile, finally came.

Dagenham's centre half Norman Welch put the ball out for a throw on the top side. While he turned his back and the whole defence took a second's breather Steve Perrin grabbed the ball and saw Keith Searle in space. Quickly throwing the ball to him, Perrin laid on the opportunity for the Blues' centre forward to run into the box and volley a superbly placed shot wide of goalkeeper Ian Huttley and into the net for a goal worth £1,000. Searle turned in triumph, the fans sent one almighty roar around the ground — the long awaited breakthrough had come at last.

But the excitement didn't end there. Dagenham stormed back upfield, home 'keeper John Maskell fumbled the ball which was thumped away by Alan Phillips. Another cross came over and Paul Birdseye headed over the crossbar a few yards out from goal. Then, as those five minutes slowly elapsed, the final whistle went and signalled a stampede of fans across Loakes Park. Wanderers had done it, pipping Enfield by just one tenth of a goal.

Scarves waving, the supporters massed in front of the stand chanting for their heroes. The players returned to the field

to receive their accolade. Manager Brian Lee and his assistant John Reardon, who had just pulled off the remarkable feat of winning the championship for the fourth time in five years, joined their squad to the chants of "We are the champions." Tony Horseman, who missed the match through injury, was lifted shoulder high wearing a light and dark blue hat. Back in the dressing rooms champagne flowed freely — the season was complete.

And what a remarkable season it's been for Wycombe Wanderers. An amazing run of 21 games without defeat put them right in line for the title as the campaign drew to a close. To clinch the championship from Enfield on goal average, they had to beat Dagenham on Saturday. Not only that, they could not afford to concede more than one goal and if they did, they had to score two themselves.

In the end, Searle's goal was enough. The title was Wycombe's and deservedly so. The victory also took their unbeaten home record in the Rothmans Isthmian League to 50 matches — since November 1972 — a remarkable achievement. Their prize will be a handsome £1,000 cheque from the sponsors plus £360 for three-clear-goal victories and £200-£300 from the sportsmanship pool.

Wycombe's record of four championships in five years is unique and speaks volumes for manager Brian Lee. Since taking over at Loakes Park Wanderers have finished runners up, winners four times and fourth once. Throw in two exciting F.A. Cup runs and an Amateur Cup semi-final and you have the whole picture. But above all, it is the way the Blues have played over those last six years. Total dedication to attacking football has brought its reward — something the professional game would do well to note. For Lee, this is a personal triumph he is unlikely to equal again.

Throughout the last few weeks of the season the manager has maintained that if the players believed in themselves and played their normal game they would come out on top in the end. That was exactly what happened on Saturday.

Wanderers, who took the field without their veteran top goalscorer Tony Horseman, began well and forced a corner straight from the kick off. After four minutes the first chance was created but Huttley saved Searle's shot at full length. It was the first of many fine saves by the 'keeper who frustrated the home strikers time and again. At one stage it looked as though he would never be beaten.

Despite the pressures of the occasion, Wanderers showed

few signs of nerves in the early stages. On a pitch soaked by heavy rain, they played the ball around well using the full width to stretch the Dagenham defence. After nine minutes Keith Mead sent a header towards the roof of the net but saw Huttley tip the ball over the top. Then Dagenham almost spoilt Wycombe's day, three minutes later. John Borland beat Gary Hand on the bottom wing and sent a cross deep to the far post. Neville Fox got up well and powered in a header which Maskell did well to block with his legs. Dagenham's claims that the ball had crossed the line were waved away.

A minute later, Dave Alexander — preferred to Howard Kennedy in midfield — missed the best chance of the match. Dagenham were caught bunched in the middle of their penalty area as the ball came across to Alex, eight yards out and unmarked. But instead of placing his shot, the bearded midfielder tried to blast it and sent the ball crashing against Huttley's legs.

Dagenham, whose big centre backs looked suspect on this slippery surface, nevertheless withstood several Wycombe attacks and began to look more and more dangerous on the break. Borland tested Maskell with a long range effort and then Fox curled a shot wide of the far post.

By holding Wycombe's attacks, the visitors put more and more pressure on the home side, who grew increasingly anxious as the game progressed. Huttley blocked Perrin's shot when a Welch back pass fell short but then at the other end Alan Phillips sliced a clearance and gave a sigh of relief as the ball sailed straight into Maskell's arms.

But it was in midfield that Wanderers were struggling. Terry Reardon had an off day and the Blues left large gaps for Dagenham to exploit.

Before half time Searle had a shot well taken by Huttley and Reardon saw the 'keeper fist away a 20 yard effort following a corner. Then, a minute before half time, Searle produced a superb turn in the box but "that man" Huttley saved Alexander's drive and kept the scores blank at half time.

So after 45 minutes Wanderers had drawn a blank. Obviously the second half would be a greater test of their character as the pressures grew more and more intense. All they could do was to keep plugging away and hope the goal would come.

But the pressure was beginning to show on Wycombe's faces. The defence started making basic errors, passes went astray and the number of chances dwindled. In an effort to improve midfield, Kennedy was brought on to replace Alexander.

In the 65th minute Huttley saved Dagenham yet again. From a free kick Searle rose unmarked on the six yard line to head Kennedy's cross. As the ball raced towards the corner of the net it seemed the breakthrough had been achieved — until Huttley stuck out a hand and diverted the ball around the post.

The anxiety continued. Hand once missed the ball completely, Kennedy sent two corners behind for goal kicks. Dagenham seemed happy to sit back and withstand the occasional Wycombe attacks. A goalless draw seemed inevitable.

Then, as the match entered the last five minutes, Wanderers scored their deciding goal. Keith Searle, a player who has improved no end since his injury last season, had put Wycombe ahead and there were just five minutes to hold out.

Dagenham sensed Wycombe would struggle for those nail-biting minutes and pressed forward in search of an equaliser. A long ball upfield looked safe for Maskell but as Fox closed in he fumbled and Phillips had to boot the ball out of play to save a goal. From Dennis Moore's resulting throw Jim Holder back headed the ball into the box and Birdseye was forced to head the ball over his own crossbar for a corner.

Wycombe steadied themselves and hit back when Kennedy sent in a 25 yard drive which Huttley held and seconds later Mr. Martin brought a tense and absorbing 90 minutes to a close. Wycombe Wanderers had done it again.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, G. Hand; D. Alexander (sub. H. Kennedy 62 mins.), T. Reardon, M. Hollifield; D. Evans, K. Searle, S. Perrin.

DAGENHAM: I. Huttley; J. Lye, N. Welch, D. Moore, P. Currie; J. Borland, T. Rosethorn, J. Holder; K. Gray, N. Fox, J. Dear. Sub. T. Harris (not used).

Referee: J. Martin (Selsdon).

Half time: 0-0. **Goalscorer,** Wycombe — Searle (85).

Official paying attendance: 3,265. **Approximate total attendance:** 3,800.

Roll of honour

1969-70: Isthmian League runners-up.

1970-71: Isthmian League champions.

1971-72: Isthmian League champions, F.A. Amateur Cup semi-finalists.

1972-73: Fourth in Isthmian League.

1973-74: Rothmans Isthmian League champions.

1974-75: Rothmans Isthmian League champions.